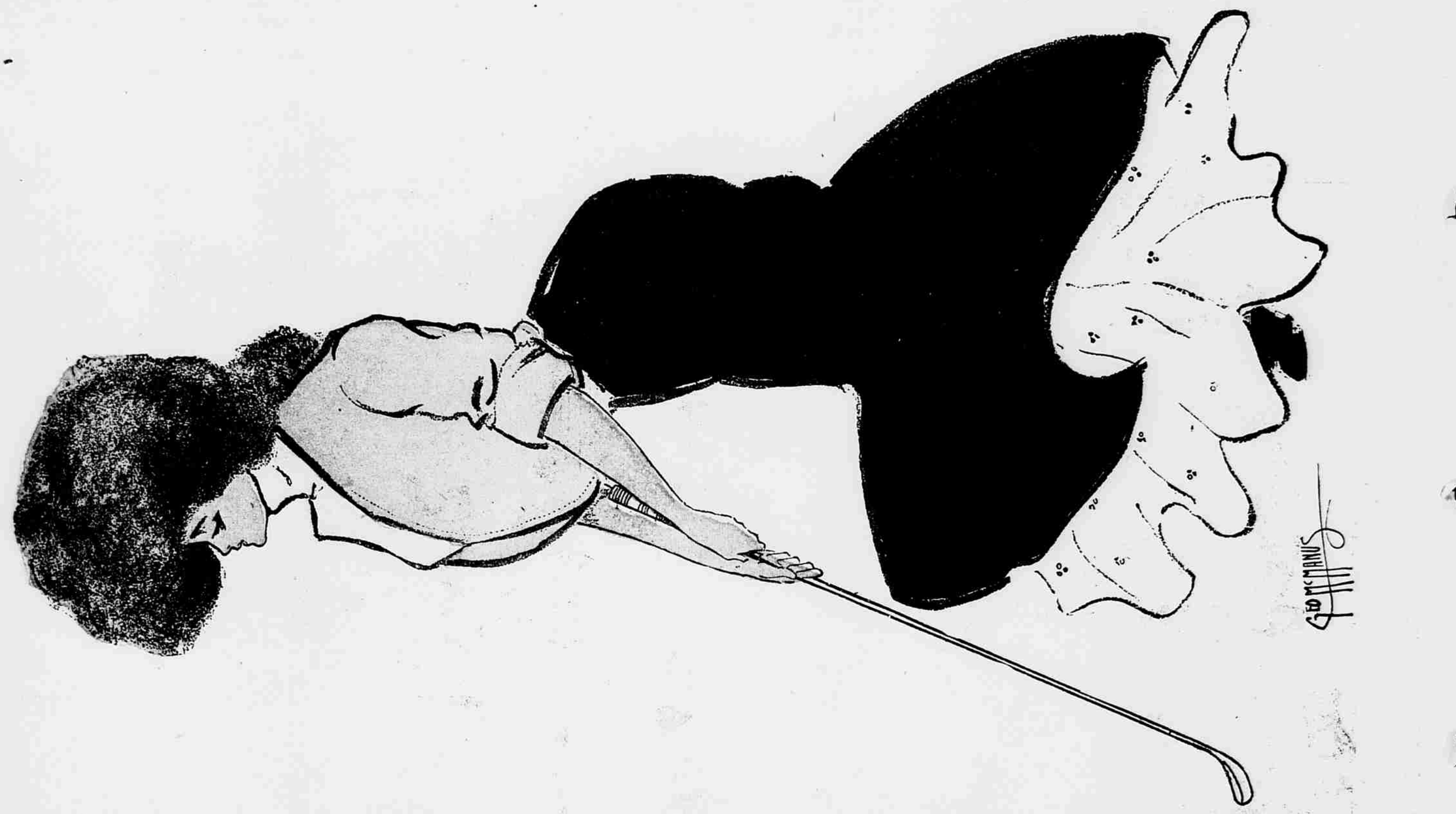
THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC POSTER GIRL



This new poster, if mounted carefully, will make a most attractive picture for "den" or library. Cut out the picture along the heavy lines and paste it onto a red or green posterboard. A board 12x15 inches is large enough and can be procured at a slight cost. Ordinary cardboard may be used as a substitute.

ELIZABETH AND HER ROOINEK:

A Thrilling Story of Love and Adventure in the Boer War.

BY EDGAR JEPSON.

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

Elizabeth came out on the top of the kopje, and while Kess, her one-eyed pony steed, cropped with a somewhat malignant joy the few blades of the only tuft of grass which survived on the bare, baked crown she tilted forward the brim of her soft hat, shapeless and drab from rain and sun, and scanned anxiously the ribbon of road which ran straight across the veldt and turned along the kopje's foot to the north.

Her eyes brightened slowly, for, far beyond the range of European sight, they marked a thickening of the haze, which meant a cloud of dust, and saw that it was moving toward her.

That dust cloud meant news—news of battle and siege, ambush and skirmish; news, perhaps, of her father, fighting with Cronje.

On the one hand, her mother was an Englishwoman and, since she had always been brought up among the Boers of her father's kin, with a natural womanly contrariness Elizabeth had clung to her mother's people, proclaiming herself in and out of season—above all, out of season—English and not Dutch.

A faint creaking out on the veldt roused her from her reverie. She brushed her hand impatiently across her eyes, thrusting away the conflict, whistled to Kess, who trotted up to her at the call, mounted him and cantered to meet the wagons. It proved to be but one wagon, though its wheels kept up a chorus of grinding squeaks, its tilt and body creaked for a dozen, and in it, smoking stolidly, sat Piet Stockvis and young Piet Stockvis, his son, neighbors and members of her father's commando. She greeted them, and turning Kess walked him beside the wagon, clamoring for news. She dragged it out of them piecemeal. They were willing enough to give it, indeed, but did not know how. Her father was well and the war was over. Cronje had beaten Methuen and driven the Rooineks into the sea; the Rooineks had been beaten at Stormberg and driven into the sea; Joubert had beaten Buller and driven him into the sea; Ladysmith had fallen; Mafeking had fallen.

For all the good news of her father, Elizabeth's heart was heavy within her.

She pulled up Kess, wondering, and saw walking, or rather staggering, behind the wagon, tied to it by a rope around his waist, a tall, slim man in a torn khaki uniform, the matted hair on his bandaged head, his face, his mustace and stubby beard caked with blood and mud and dust, his wild eye fixed on an imaginary crew, at which he roared without ceasing.

Elizabeth would have seen a Kaffir in that plight with a faint annoyance and possibly a faint pity; the sight of an Englishman, one of her mother's people, so treated scandalized her beyond words, outraged all her womanly ideas of conduct of war between white nations, and she rode to the front of the wagon in a flame of rage.

"Who's this you've got tied to your wagon?" she cried, imperiously.

"That's our Rooinek," said the elder Stockvis, his simple, stolid face breaking in to an expression of gentle pride. "We found him wandering on the velt and we're taking him home to show to the little ones."

"Unloose him at once! Take him into the wagon! He's wounded. He's very ill!" cried Elizabeth.

"Take a cursed Rooinek into the wagon? Not I!" cried Stockvis, in the liveliest surprise and disgust at the suggestion.

Elizabeth protested, argued, entreated and raged without stirring him from his stubborn resolves.

At last she said firmly: "Very well: either you take him into the wagon or you stay here."

She rode to the head of the long span of oxen, unslinging the little Marlin repeating rifle from her back, reined in Kess, and with the rifle on her arm, sat facing Stockvis, smiling unpleasantly. Stockvis fumed and raged, swearing softly to his son, grasping slowly the fact that he was helpless.

He dare not touch Gerrit De Ruijter's daughter.

It would mean shooting the four Kaffirs with him, who stood around grinning at his discomfiture.

At last it flashed upon Stockvis that his furlough lasted only ten days, and at the same moment he remembered that he was not bent with any great seriousness on taking his captive home to show to the little ones, and he roared: "All this fuss about a very damned Rooinek! Take him yourself, and much good may he do you!"

"Very good," said Elizabeth, throwing her rifle over her shoulder and moving toward the wagon.

The Kaffir drivers, rejoicing at the defeat of their master, ran to loose the prisoner; with a shriek of agony the wheels turned and the wagon moved on.

She looked at him with a knitted, puzzled brow, as the greatness of the task of getting him the fifteen miles daunted her, and while, with half a mind, she considered how she was to do it, with the other half she tried to understand his oarsman's gibberish.

They rested for half an hour and then set out. For all that her riding boots fitted her admirably, her feet were blistered. Suddenly her companion cried: "I've a guinea thirst on me! Bring me some whisky and potash, Tomkins! Bring it in a bucket!"

She understood him roughly, but the nearest spruit was at least two miles ahead, and she bade him be patient in vain. He kept crying, almost in a wail, "I'm so thirsty!" or, angrily, "Hang it all, Muriel, you might get me a drink!"

She gave him soothing words and made all the haste she could, with the result that she reached the spruit and the end of her forces at the same moment. They climbed painfully down to the water. Recent rain had swelled it to a fair stream. He tumbled out of the saddle and drank like a horse.

Her legs would not carry her another mile and night was not an hour off. There was nothing for it but to leave the Englishman, ride home and return with another horse. She must chance his wandering away. No, she would not chance it; she tied him to a tree.

In a trice she was in the saddle. Kess, assured that he was galloping toward mealies, stretched himself out, and in less than half an hour she reached Vrengderijk, her homestead. Instead of returning herself, she sent some Kaffir servants for him.

For the next ten days she fought an untiring battle against his fever.

His first utterances were those of a child of 7, his chief emotion was the vivid, changing curiosity of a child among strange surroundings. When he came to his senses Elizabeth's first question, and she held her breath when she had asked it, was: "Who is Muriel?"

"I don't know," he said, after thinking a little while, "I never heard of him."

Elizabeth's gasp of relief was almost a groan. Then she drew from him a child's account of himself. His name was Antony Arbuthnot. He lived in a house in a park, with papa and mamma and sissy. He had a pony called Taffy, a dog called Gyp and four rabbits. He did not know the name of the house; his papa was called Antony, his mother Hetty. Every fresh gap in his memory warmed Elizabeth's heart with a fresh joy; it seemed to make him more her own.

She set herself to teach him with a mother's zest, and out of a curious jealousy of his past she taught him for the most part Dutch.

Then they fell in love with such a love as might have brightened Eden before the fall.

Their passion was the natural fusion of two tender, ardent natures, quickened neither by vanity, jealousy nor the desire for mastery.

Elizabeth had grown up as innocent as Eve, for since her mother's death she had enjoyed the companionship of none of her own sex, as she was not the girl to let the Kaffir women talk to her of any other than household affairs.

Her cousin of Weltevreden and the Schommels of Rusthof, the only near farms, were all men or boys, and her father had discouraged them from hanging about her, as they were ready enough to do, for he was resolved to keep his daughter as long as he could.

She had then scarcely dreamed of love, and marriage, the fixed fate of all women in that patriarchal land, seemed to her a faraway thing.

And Antony, owing to the happy loss of twenty years of his life, could have walked an equal with the sinless Adam. Its very vagueness deepened probably their passion.

There is no knowing how Antony was inspired to kiss her. It may be that some memory of kissing his mother in his childhood taught him; it may be that some strong desire for the touch of his lips, deep down below knowledge in Elizabeth's heart, infected him! It may have been a sudden whisper of nature herself.

But one night, after happy, troubled hours on the veranda, as they rose to go to bed, in the darkness she stumbled against him. On the instant he threw a clumsy, trembling arm around her and touched her cheek clumsily with his lips.

For a breath she leaned against him, inert and quivering; then without a word she broke away, ran to her room and threw herself on the bed, sobbing in a tumult of joy, amazement and fear. He dropped back into his chair in a bewildering trouble hardly less than hers.

When they met next morning they were indeed ill at ease. Neither could meet the other's eye. Elizabeth's face was aflame of flushes and Antony's tan was deepened to a brick red. Their words halted on their tongues and died away. Their uneasiness with each other lasted through the day, but as they came riding home at sunset their eyes were shining, Antony's very brightly, Elizabeth's with a lesser light, at the thought of the coming hours on the veranda. But even there in the heartening darkness, they were ill at ease for awhile. Then Antony's courage came to him. He drew his chair to hers and put his arm around her and kissed her again.

Elizabeth trembled, but she did not shrink from his lips and he lifted her on to his knee and kissed her again and again. Presently they were babbling like children over their wonderful discovery, and the feelings of their hearts found at last something of an expression.

The next day they rode through a new world stamped afresh in the mind of its maker, and that night Elizabeth prayed that Antony might never remember his past or Muriel.

For a few days they lived in this golden world, mapping out a golden future, when Gerrit de Ruijter should come back from the war and they should marry.

At whiles the dread of his remembering a past that would tear him from her would chill for a breath Elizabeth's glow, but on Antony all skies smiled. No faint distant thunder of the war marred their serenity, for Elizabeth rode no more for news to the track of the world.

Then the world found them out. One day, as they were driving a herd of sheep to fresh pasturage, they saw a horseman riding toward them across the veldt, and as he came up to them Elizabeth recognized in the squat, squared-faced, pig-eyed boy of 14, who belabored cruelly his jaded mare, Fritz, the youngest of the Schommels.

He reined up twenty yards from them, looked them over with an impudent stare, and said, with a malicious laugh, "So that's your Rooinek, Betje!

"You won't have him long. We're tired of your disgracing the countryside, riding about with a cursed Englander, and tomorrow we're coming. I and father and Hans, and all of us, to hang him. And Hans is going to marry you.

"He'll sjambok your cursed English notions out of you; he says he will."

Elizabeth was white with anger and sudden fear, but she cried, fiercely: "The Schommels have interfered with the De Ruijters before now, and it was the Schommels who were hanged!"

"Times are changed, Betje!" cried the boy, with another laugh. "You haven't heard the news.

"Cronje is captured and your father and your cousins are prisoners. Hans is going to marry you—after we've hanged that cursed Rooinek—whether you like it or not, and Vrengderijk will some day belong to the Schommels. We've wanted it long enough."

She rode home with her head high, but with fear knocking at her heart. The Schommels were the black sheep of the countryside.

Their long record of atrocious brutalities to the natives, their slaves of the tribes who had once lived near them, appalled even their neighbors, tolerant as they were in such matters.

Antony listened with a very grave face as she told him of their danger, but when she had done he only said, with the cheery air of an older man: "It was a good thing that that boy must brag of what they were going to do.

"We will fight them."

And for the first time Elizabeth knew that he was stronger than she, and the knowledge warmed her heart.

As soon as they reached home they set about turning the house into a fort—no very difficult matter, for the Bechuana border was not far away, and it had been built in the days of many raids. Antony's cheerfulness, his boyish joy at the prospect of a fight, kept Elizabeth's courage high.

He helped with the defenses, and it was at his suggestion that she dispatched a Kaffir to Weltevreden with a letter asking help, on the chance that one or more of her cousins might be home on furlough looking after the farm. Later three more Kaffirs followed him, driving thither the best of the cattle and the horses.

But when all their measures had been taken, in the reaction from the bustle Elizabeth's heart began to sink. She and Antony supped in the big kitchen, and he saw to it that she made a good supper. They talked for a while after it of her father and cousins, prisoners of the English.

Their fate touched her but little; Antony filled all her mind. Soon, seeing how weary her forebodings had made her, he sent her to bed, and as she bade him good night she clung to him as though she would never let him go. She slept but little.

After daybreak Elizabeth kept an eye toward Weltevreden, but no succoring hoofs stirred the dust. An hour after dawn they saw a dust cloud on the Rusthof side.

For a while it drew near very slowly; then of a sudden it quickened, and at a mile away a band of horsemen burst from it, and rode, hell for leather, for the house.

In three minutes the Schommels and their Kaffirs galloped, whooping, into the garden and pulled up before the door.

Their whooping ceased suddenly at the aspect of the house. They had looked to surprise it, for Frits had far too accurate a knowledge of the temper of his family to tell them of his warning indiscretion.

But Venderijk, with its closed door and heavily shuttered windows, showed no flattering air. They drew together muttering their wonder.

Antony and Elizabeth were looking down on the frowsy, unkempt, pig-eyed crew from an upper window, and he was asking eagerly which was Hans.

"The man on the right of the old man," said Elizabeth, and threw back the shutter.

At the sight of her the Schommels cried out with one voice, and Hans, their humorist, sent them into hoarse bellows of laughter by roaring, "Ach! My beautiful bride!"

Elizabeth waited till the din died down; then she said, "What do you want?"

"We've come for that very damned Rooinek of yours," said old Schommel, a blear-eyed old rogue, with the brutal face of a buffalo bull.

"Well, you won't have him," said Elizabeth, quietly.

A sudden sense of unlooked-for difficulties suffused the wits of the old man. He swore savagely and yelled: "Open the door, you jade! Open at once, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Open the door or you'll taste my sjambok before we're married as well as after!" roared Hans.

Elizabeth's clear laugh rang out like a whiplash.

One cried to burst in the door, another to shoot the jade, another to shoot the Rooinek; then all suggestions were drowned in a storm of cursing.

In the midst of the uproar the ingenuous Frits slipped off his horse and, screened by his excited family, fired at Antony. The bullet ripped a piece out of his tunic. On the instant he fired back, and smashed Hans's right arm just below the shoulder as Elizabeth slammed to the shutter.

The Schommel Kaffirs, headed by old Schommel, bolted for the trees. His slower offspring were staring at Hans writhing and shrieking on the ground, when four horsemen came quietly but swiftly around the corner of the house, and a stern voice roared, "Drop those rifles!"

The slow Schommels swung round to find Gerrit de Ruitjert and his three nephews from Weltevreden looking at them down their rifle barrels; they had acted on inaccurate information.

Their mouths opened slowly; then, with one grunt, they let their rifles fall.

There came a curse from old Schommel among the trees, and in a breath he was clattering over the veldt, his Kaffirs after him.

Elizabeth and Antony ran down and unbarred the door, the Kaffirs ran out and pulled the young Schommels off their horses, and she had her arms round her father's neck, and was kissing him.

While the Kaffirs bound the Schommels they went into the house, all talking together.

Gerrit listened to Elizabeth's story with a very angry face; his nephews, with the impetuous generosity of youth, were for hanging the Schommels then and there, but presently they agreed that they had better breakfast first and occupy their cooler hour of digestion dealing with them.

Humanized by the abundant breakfast, they were more inclined to leniency with the Schommels. They were tied up one by one, and a stout Kaffir gave them fifty lashes apiece with a sjambok.

In the afternoon his nephews rode away home, and Gerrit and Elizabeth rode around the farm, for he was eager to learn how it had fared during his absence. As they came back she told him of her love for Antony.

He heard her gravely and said that there was no reason for haste; that he must consider the matter; but she had made it clear to him that her love and her happiness were one.

Her confession distressed him, for he had looked to have her to himself for some years yet.

Again, the notion of her marrying an Englishman was strange to him, since he had always looked upon her as sure to marry her cousin, Dirk. Seeing her with this foreign lover it is not to be wondered at if he felt some of the feelings of Lambro. But for days he said nothing, but watched Antony and her carefully, and little by little his repugnance to their marrying began to wear away.

He was growing to like Antony.

His simplicity was after his own heart, and his cheerfulness, his boyish jokes, were as pleasant as they were unfamiliar to him. He found that he would make in time a very shrewd farmer. He was beginning to feel that if he had a son he would have liked him such a one as Antony.

Then one day he said to Elizabeth, "When are you and Antony going to get married?"

"Oh—h—h, I—I—don't know," she stammered with a great flush. In answer to the same question Antony said promptly, "Tomorrow."

In his slow, methodical way Gerrit set about arranging matters so that the marriage must be good, for he knew something of the difference of the marriage laws in different countries. Antony became a burgher of the Free State with very little delay.

In such a matter Ruijter was a name to conjure with. In the distress of the country it seemed no time for the festival, and the marriage was very quiet. A Dutch pastor from Vryburg celebrated it in the parlor, and the three De Ruijters of Weltevreden were the guests and witnesses.

For two months Elizabeth and Antony enjoyed an even fuller happiness.

Then one evening, as they were on their way home from an outlying pasture and Antony was riding carelessly with his eyes on Elizabeth, his horse put his foot in a hole, came down and threw him sprawling over its head. It was nothing of a fall, but the jar lifted the bone which pressed on his brain and blotted out his memory.

He drew himself into a sitting posture and stared around the familiar veldt, another man, a crowd of memories thronging his mind. He knew himself Sir Antony Arbuthnot of Righton Grange; that he had a wife, Muriel, and a child, Antony, in England. The panorama of the lost years unrolled swiftly before the eye of his mind. He saw his schooldays, the days at Oxford, the days at Righton, his courtship of Muriel, their marriage, the birth of their boy, his journey to South Africa to look after his mining interests, the besieging of Kimberley, his enlistment in the Town Guard, the brush with the Boers when he was scouting, the first few rifle shots.

Then came a blank, and then he saw himself in bed at Vrengderijk and Elizabeth at his bedside, the events of the last five months following clearly. In a few seconds he saw all his life. He turned a scared face up to the anxious Elizabeth, who was asking where he was hurt. At the sight of it she caught her breath and, clutching at her bosom, cried:

"You remember! Who—who—is Muriel?"

"I remember," he said, and rising heavily to his feet started across the veldt.

"Tell me—tell me!" she gasped huskily.

"I must think," he said slowly.

He caught his horse, mounted, and they rode home at a walk in silence; now and again he looked at her terror-stricken face with pitiful eyes.

Gerrit wondered at their silence during supper and on the veranda. With Elizabeth's hand in his, Antony sat trying to think the matter out. Unwillingly he had done her the worst possible wrong; how could he right it? Duty called him to Muriel; duty chained him to Elizabeth.

At last he made up his mind that with Elizabeth at any rate he would be honest. He had an infinite confidence in her; she should help him decide.

When they were in their bedroom he told her. She listened to him in a dumb misery, a shivering jealousy, till he had ended. Then she cried: "Oh, how she must have missed you! How she must have grieved!"

Antony had thought little of that, and his heart smote him.

She buried her face in her hands and thought awhile. Then she said drearily, "You must go back to her." Then she cried, "Ah, no; it is too late—too late!" And Antony knew that he was bound to her by a twofold chain.

"Is it so?" he said, with a groan, and started to pace the room.

Elizabeth lay face downward on the bed, sobbing.

Presently she said: "I couldn't give you up now, if I would. And yet—and yet—you must go back to her; you are bound to—in honor. And—and—I can bear it."

"I will not give you up!" said Antony, savagely. "Look here, my child, we must be practical. After all, there's more than one world.

"Muriel is as much in another as if she lived in the moon. There are a summer and a winter in every year. I shall spend the summer in England, the winters in the Orange Free State."

Elizabeth sat up, gasping. "You expect me to be content with half of you?" she cried,

"I would give you the whole, with all my heart, but how can I? And I have only half of you—half the year with you, that is. I shall hate the double life, the deceit, the concealment, the worrying possibility of the truth coming out.

"But we cannot help ourselves."

"I will never endure it! Never—never!" said Elizabeth feebly, and she began to sob afresh.

Antony soothed her very tenderly.

His suggestion rasped all her womanly feeling, but the compromise appealed to her human tendency to like half a loaf better than no bread.

She did not, however, agree at once, and for three days they threshed and threshed the matter out. At the end his idea seemed a bad way, but the only way out of a bad business.

They explained to her father that Antony's memory had come back and he must go to his estates in England for a while; of Muriel they said nothing, but they brightened his heart with talk of the importation of shorthorns.

A week later Antony rode away from Vrengderijk.

He rode up to the hotel, and a big man on the verandah gave a great shout, cried, "Arbuthnot! By all that's holy! Arbuthnot!" came running down the steps and wrung his hand.

He recognized as a figure in a dream his old friend, Bromley Carter.

"We thought you were dead!" he cried. "We all thought you were dead. Where have you been?" Then his face fell solemn, and he said in a gentler voice: "I was awful sorry to hear the bad news of your wife—so awfully sudden."

"Bad news of my wife?" sair Antony with a gasp, think for the moment that he spoke of Elizabeth. Then it flashed upon him that he spoke of Muriel. "What bad news? I've heard nothing for months."

"She's—she's—oh, she's——" Bromley Carter stammered, and words failed him.

"Not dead?" cried nAtony.

"Yes; four months ago—typhoid."

For a breath the world swam around Antony and he swayed in his saddle.

Then one thought, one desirt, gripped him like a fury—to sweep the anguish out of Elizabeth's eyes at once, on the instant.

He swung round his horse, jammed in his spurs, and tore at a mad gallop down the street.

His Kaffirs opened their mouths, stared after him and then followed.